TONI MORRISON

Playing in the Dark

WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

Vintage Books

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC

NEW YORK

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, AUGUST 1993

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Morrison, Toni.
Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination / Toni Morrison.—
1st Vintage Books ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-679-74542-4 (pbk.)
1. American literature—White authors—History and criticism.
2. Afro-Americans in literature. 3. Black in literature. 4. Race in literature.
I. Title
PS173.N4M67 1993
810.9—dc20 92-50581
CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America
79B86

Preface

Some years ago, in 1983 I believe, I read Marie Cardinal's *The Words To Say It*. More than the enthusiasm of the person who suggested the book, I was persuaded by the title: five words taken from Boileau that spoke the full agenda and unequivocal goal of a novelist. Cardinal's project was not fictional, however; it was to document her madness, her therapy, and the complicated process of healing in language as exact and as evocative as possible in order to make both her experience and her understanding of it accessible to a stranger. The narrative into which life seems to cast itself surfaces most forcefully in certain kinds of psychoanalysis, and Cardinal proves herself ideal in rendering this "deep story" aspect of her life. She has written several books, won the Prix International, taught philosophy, and, during her journey into health, admits that she always planned someday to write about it.

It is a fascinating book and, although I was skeptical at first of its classification as "autobiographical novel," the accuracy of the label quickly becomes apparent. It is shaped quite

as novels most frequently are with scenes and dialogue selectively ordered and situated to satisfy conventional narrative expectations. There are flashbacks, well-placed descriptive passages, carefully paced action, and timely discoveries. Clearly her preoccupations, her strategies, and her efforts to make chaos coherent are familiar to novelists.

From the beginning I found one question insisting itself: when precisely did the author know she was in trouble? What was the narrative moment, the specular even spectacular scene that convinced her that she was in danger of collapse? Less than forty pages into the book she describes that moment, her "first encounter with the Thing."

> "My first anxiety attack occurred during a Louis Armstrong concert. I was nineteen or twenty. Armstrong was going to improvise with his trumpet, to build a whole composition in which each note would be important and would contain within itself the essence of the whole. I was not disappointed: the atmosphere warmed up very fast. The scaffolding and flying buttresses of the jazz instruments supported Armstrong's trumpet, creating spaces which were adequate enough for it to climb higher, establish itself, and take off again. The sounds of the trumpet sometimes piled up together, fusing a new musical base, a sort of matrix which gave birth to one precise, unique note, tracing a sound whose path was almost painful, so absolutely necessary had its equilibrium and duration become; it tore at the nerves of those who followed it.
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> "My heart began to accelerate, becoming more important than the music, shaking the bars of my rib cage, compressing my lungs so the air could no longer enter them. Gripped by panic at the idea of dying there in the middle of spasms, stomping feet, and the crowd howling, I ran into the street like someone possessed."

I remember smiling when I read that, partly in admiration of the clarity in her recollection of the music—its immediacy—partly because of what leaped into my mind: what on earth was Louie playing that night? What was there in his music that drove this sensitive young girl hyperventilating into the street to be struck by the beauty and ravage of a camellia "svelte in appearance but torn apart inside"?

Enunciating that incident was crucial in the launching of her therapy, but the imagery that worked as a catalyst for her anxiety attack goes unremarked—by her, by her analyst, and by the eminent doctor, Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote both the Preface and the Afterword. None of them is interested in what ignited her strong apprehension of death ("I'm going to die!" is what she was thinking and screaming), of physical power out of control ("nothing could appease me. And so I continued to run"), as well as this curious flight from the genius of improvisation, sublime order, poise, and the illusion of permanence. The "one precise, *unique* note, tracing

a sound whose path was almost *painful,* so absolutely necessary had its *equilibrium* and *duration* become; it *tore at the nerves* of those [other than Armstrong, apparently] who followed it" [italics mine]. Unbearable equilibrium and duration; nerve-wracking balance and permanence. These are wonderful tropes for the illness that was breaking up Cardinal's life. Would an Edith Piaf concert or a Dvorak composition have had the same effect? Certainly either could have. What solicited my attention was whether the cultural associations of jazz were as important to Cardinal's "possession" as were its intellectual foundations. I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them. In fact I had started, casually like a game, keeping a file of such instances.

The Louis Armstrong catalyst was an addition to this file, and encouraged me to reflect on the consequences of jazz—its visceral, emotional, and intellectual impact on the listener. Later on in Cardinal's autobiography, another luminous moment is described. But this one is not a violently physical reaction to the art of a black musician; it is instead a conceptual response to a black, that is, nonwhite, figuration. The author names the manifestation of her illness—the hallucinatory images of fear and self-loathing—the Thing. In reconstructing the origin of the powerfully repellent feelings the Thing incites, Cardinal writes, "It seems to me that the Thing took root in me permanently when I understood that we were to assassinate Algeria. For Algeria was my real

mother. I carried her inside me the way a child carries the blood of his parents in his veins." She goes on to record the conflicting pain that war in Algeria caused her as a French girl born in Algeria, and her association of that country with the pleasures of childhood and budding sexuality. In moving images of matricide, of white slaughter of a black mother, she locates the origin of the Thing. Again, an internal devastation is aligned with a socially governed relationship with race. She was a colonialist, a white child, loving and loved by Arabs, but warned against them in relationships other than distant and controlled ones. Indeed, a white camellia "svelte in appearance but torn apart inside."

In Cardinal's narrative, black or colored people and symbolic figurations of blackness are markers for the benevolent and the wicked; the spiritual (thrilling tales of Allah's winged horse) and the voluptuous; of "sinful" but delicious sensuality coupled with demands for purity and restraint. These figures take shape, form patterns, and play about in the pages of the autobiography. One of her earliest realizations in therapy concerns prepubescent sexuality. When she understands and no longer despises this aspect of her self, Cardinal is emboldened to stand up and tell the doctor, as she exits his office, "You shouldn't keep that gargoyle in your office, it is hideous." And to remark further, "It was the first time I addressed him other than as a patient." Signaling the breakthrough, and strategic to its articulation, is this sign of horror and fear lodged in a gargoyle over which the now liberated patient has some control.

Many other examples of these narrative gearshifts—metaphors; summonings; rhetorical gestures of triumph, despair, and closure dependent on the acceptance of the associative language of dread and love that accompanies blackness—were piling up in my file. Examples I thought of as a category of sources of imagery, like water, flight, war, birth, religion, and so on, that make up the writer's kit.

These musings on Marie Cardinal's text are not in themselves wholly necessary for the book's appreciation, being simply illustrations of how each of us reads, becomes engaged in and *watches* what is being read all at the same time. I include the thoughts I had while reading this particular work because they identify the stages of my interest, first, in the pervasive use of black images and people in expressive prose; second, in the shorthand, the taken-for-granted assumptions that lie in their usage; and, finally, to the subject of this book: the sources of these images and the effect they have on the literary imagination and its product.

The principal reason these matters loom large for me is that I do not have quite the same access to these traditionally useful constructs of blackness. Neither blackness nor "people of color" stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and know-

able in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; villifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (The only short story I have ever written, "Recitatif," was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.)

Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability.

Antonia S. Byatt in *Possession* has described certain kinds of readings that seem to me inextricable from certain experiences of writing, "when the knowledge that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there,* that we, the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though

we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge."

The imagination that produces work which bears and invites rereadings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language. Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds. And although upon that struggle the positioning of the reader has justifiable claims, the author's presence—her or his intentions, blindness, and sight—is part of the imaginative activity.

For reasons that should not need explanation here, until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination. When does racial "unconsciousness" or awareness of race enrich interpretive language, and when does it impoverish it? What does positing one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail? What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be "universal" or race-free? In other words, how is "literary whiteness" and "literary blackness" made, and what is the consequence of that construction? How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to

be "humanistic"? When, in a race-conscious culture, is that lofty goal actually approximated? When not and why? Living in a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer. When this world view is taken seriously as agency, the literature produced within and without it offers an unprecedented opportunity to comprehend the resilience and gravity, the inadequacy and the force of the imaginative act.

Thinking about these matters has challenged me as a writer and a reader. It has made both activities harder and infinitely more rewarding. It has, in fact, elevated and sharpened the delight I take in the work that literature, under the pressure that racialized societies level on the creative process, manages to do. Over and over again I am amazed by the treasure trove that American literature is. How compelling is the study of those writers who take responsibility for *all* of the values they bring to their art. How stunning is the achievement of those who have searched for and mined a shareable language for the words to say it.

Toni Morrison
February 1992

Playing in the Dark is the result of questions raised in three William E. Massey Sr. Lectures given at Harvard University as well as the basis of a course I teach in American literature. In an academic environment, open and demanding, I have been able to advance this inquiry and test ideas with exceptional students. The latter have been so important to this work, dedicating these pages to the classes at Princeton I have been pleased to teach is imperative. Among those students are three whose research assistance was invaluable: Dwight McBride, Pamela Ali, and especially Tara McGowan.

Major help in translating the lectures into readable manuscript came from Peter Dimock. I am grateful to him for his intelligence and his rare and graceful editorial prowess.

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